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ABSTRACT

This series of articles examines the condition of public schools and public school construction in Florida's Miami and Dade Counties. To prepare the series, the Miami Herald studied thousands of pages of construction records, correspondence, school district reports, and accounting statements over 15 years. It analyzed state and national construction costs, school enrollment reports for Florida's 67 school districts, growth rates, and census data. More than 200 people completed interviews, and reporters and photographers made about 25 visits to schools. The Herald obtained school district databases detailing construction costs and schedules, contractor and architect information, contractor defaults, construction charges, and life-safety violations. The construction analysis of new schools, additions, renovations, and repairs was based on over 1,200 projects, totaling $1.6 billion, completed since 1988.(SM)

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Crumbling schools: Tens of millions wasted in slow, sloppy construction, and Miami-Dade children are the losers

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER AND JASON GROTTO
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Miami-Dade Public Schools squandered tens of millions of dollars on a mangled construction program, delayed crucial projects by months or even years, and trapped children in schools that are not only crowded, but obsolete, poorly maintained and in some cases downright unsafe, a Herald investigation has found.

Questionable policies, practices and politics have repeatedly hobbled construction in the nation's fourth-largest school system, even as student enrollment soared and the need for new or renovated classrooms bred near-emergencies on campuses across the county.

In North Miami Beach, 170 eighth-graders at John F. Kennedy Middle School pack into the auditorium for social studies. Teachers lecture with a microphone. Students balance notebooks on their knees.

In Little Havana, Miami Senior High wrestles with hundreds of fire and safety hazards on the 75-year-old campus, from busted fire alarms to missing smoke detectors to a decrepit and cracking second-story walkway.

North of Miami Lakes, some students in Palm Springs North Elementary's 20 portable classrooms carry extra shoes to school because lopsided walkways flood with muddy water every time it rains.

Fueled by a $980 million bond referendum, Miami-Dade County Public Schools 15 years ago launched the nation's biggest and most aggressive construction program. But the school district has busted its budget on at least 39 of 44 new schools analyzed by The Herald, or about nine out of 10 since 1988.

Those new schools alone came in at least $117 million over budget -- enough money to build 10 new elementary schools.

Renovation projects have been just as troubled, running up millions in unexpected expenses.

Delays on dozens of projects, frequently caused by poor planning or errors made by architects and engineers, have cost the county's students a cumulative 84,951 days as a result of lost construction time.

That's 233 years.

"The productivity of construction and maintenance are the two most important issues facing the district," said Superintendent Merrett Stierheim, who took over 15 months ago and promises to fix the problems. ``I want to turn it around."

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PERVASIVE PROBLEMS

Full text available at:
http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/living/education/5174472.htm

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What went wrong in a district that has spent $250 million just managing its massive construction program? The Herald's investigation found a series of missteps in every phase of the building process:

• Problems started at the drawing board. The district repeatedly failed to plan and prioritize projects, and allowed principals, curriculum specialists and administrators to haphazardly make changes in designs along the way.

Those demands, in part, drove up architect fees. A 1998 study of construction projects at existing schools found that fees shot up by 38 percent, or more than $16 million. The district also lost thousands of dollars paying architects for some of more than 65 projects that later were delayed, merged with other projects or canceled.

• A series of architect disputes, funding constraints and other mishaps allowed projects to idle for an average of 888 days -- or 2 ½ years -- before contractors were brought in to start building. Thirty projects each sat for 2,000 days or more.

• Even after construction started, frequent and sometimes subjective changes continued to hamper projects. One-third of the changes made during construction were fueled by district staffers allowed to alter projects even as crews were knocking down walls or pouring concrete. Those changes added more than $40 million in costs and 13,140 days in delays.

• Architect and engineering errors also taxed projects during construction, accounting for almost a quarter of the increased costs and more than 9,560 days in lost time. The School Board for years hired architects who had little or no experience in designing schools, and continued to use them even as costs were rising and delays were upsetting schedules.

• The School Board has gone easy on shoddy construction, too, giving more than $228 million in repeat business to at least 21 contractors who delayed jobs, turned in bad work or failed to finish projects.

• After all the delays and rising costs, the system was left with problem buildings. At least 19 suffer from water leaks, cracking stucco and other deficiencies, and district staffers are now checking dozens more.

• At the same time, the district has ignored thousands of dangerous fire and life-safety deficiencies that for years have threatened schools.

DISREGARDING ADVICE

Exacerbating the crisis: The school board repeatedly failed to rein in the troubled construction program and made key decisions that often went against the recommendation of the district's top staff.

"This is appalling," Miami Beach High School Principal Jeanne Friedman fumed as she walked across campus noting roof leaks, a broken air-conditioning system and classrooms that reeked of mildew. ``These kids only get one shot around."

There was a time when the school system had a chance to forge ahead.

In 1988, determined to ease crowding and revitalize schools, Miami-Dade County voters approved the bond referendum. Combining that money with other funding, the district had $1.6 billion, a colossal sum for a struggling urban system.

An analysis of financial reports shows that the School Board has actually received almost $6 billion since

then to build, repair and maintain schools. The money has poured in through bond proceeds, state construction dollars, property taxes and other sources.

Yet, building has not kept pace.

In 1988, the board promised to build 49 schools and renovate existing campuses. Today, the district boasts that it has opened 64 new schools, but one is a campus entirely of portables, seven were largely paid for before the referendum, and two were simply put into buildings that already existed.

That means the district actually built 54 from scratch. It took the better part of 15 years, far longer than expected, and the district had not just $1.6 billion to spend -- but more than 3 ½ times that much.

At least nine schools are still waiting for the promised renovations.

"The public has not come close to getting its money's worth," said Paul Novack, a member of the state-appointed board studying school construction.

District staffers say the school system has delivered a successful program, despite Hurricane Andrew, funding shortages, changes in building codes, and surges in student enrollment. The district has repaired roofs and wired many campuses for technology. Art and music suites have opened. So have new science labs.

Officials also say improvements in recent years have dramatically reduced such things as architect errors and changes during construction.

"Were there problems and difficulties? Of course there were," said John Pennington, whose office manages construction litigation for the school system. ``But the amount of things that didn't get done or didn't get done properly . . . is very small in the scheme of things."

But at dozens of aging campuses, administrators eager to focus on the finer points of curriculum respond instead to roof leaks, busted plumbing and the needs of teachers forced into classrooms too tiny for creative teaching, too obsolete for technology. And crowding is worse than ever.

"I have kids who are eating lunch on the floor," said Principal Victor Lopez at Miami Senior High, where the cafeteria holds just 450 students. Enrollment this year tops 3,200. ``The district will tell you that they're going to take care of it, but we're still waiting."

EARLY SETBACKS

The school district's construction program stumbled before a shovel hit dirt.

With the new money pouring in, a skeleton crew of district staffers struggled to decide where to build, which companies to hire, what to tackle first.

"We were so consumed with the political controversy in getting the bond referendum passed, we woke up the next morning after it had passed, and we had done nothing to prepare for it," said Octavio Visiedo, superintendent from 1990 to 1996.

The School Board hired a construction management company to run the program. But after two years and almost $18 million in payments, Visiedo persuaded the board to run the program in-house even though the district had never before taken on a building challenge even remotely close in size.

Visiedo said the decision saved millions. But the change caused major delays.

Bhagwan Gupta, with a background in business and personnel, not construction, was put in charge. The district had only a handful of project managers to oversee job sites. The management company had about 40 people.

"It would have been better to have an outside firm complete those projects," Gupta says now. ``. . . We had to pick up the pieces."

Making things worse, the district allowed curriculum specialists, principals and regional superintendents to regularly weigh in on the design and planning of projects, often paralyzing architects.

The school district needs to be more coordinated and controlled, said architect David Feinberg, who chairs the education committee of the American Institute of Architects in Miami. ``There could be more than 10 [educators] involved in a project. . . . They could delay a project for months."

So could parents and community leaders, who frequently demanded costly or time-consuming changes.

Architect fees at some schools skyrocketed. A sampling of 95 projects reviewed by The Herald found that architects working at existing schools were paid average fees that equaled 11 percent of overall construction budgets -- meaning that for a $1 million project, architects were paid $110,000. Other large districts generally pay fees for similar projects at between 6 percent and 9 percent.

At some schools, architects were paid fees nearing or even topping 20 percent. The district also lost thousands paying architects for projects that were put on hold, revamped or canceled altogether.

At Miami Jackson Senior High, the district paid at least $220,000 to an architect hired to design a $2.5 million addition and remodeling project in 1996. Four years later, the district scrapped the project and decided to build a new school.

Now, almost seven years later, the district has hired yet another architect.

SLOW TO START

Runaway spending has been only part of the problem.

The school system allowed projects to languish for months or years before contractors were hired to build.

In some cases, the district simply didn't have the money. But in dozens of projects, disputes with architects threw schedules off by months.

Already hundreds of students over capacity, American Senior High waited more than eight years for the district to hire a general contractor for an addition promised during the bond campaign.

The problem: The architect produced flawed designs, according to the district staff.

"It just took forever to finish the drawings," said Peter de la Horra, executive director of school construction.

Architect Jimmie Allen acknowledged problems with designs and delays at American Senior High. But he said he had problems with engineers who worked with him and added that the district contributed to delays

because staff members frequently changed the project's scope.

The problems with some architects were created in part by School Board policy.

During the bond campaign, the board promised to hire architects who had not worked for the system -- a push to spread the lucrative work across the community.

"Anybody that had learned how to work with us couldn't get another job [working for the school district]," said Pennington.

In a six-year period, the district worked with 188 architects on 275 projects. The construction staff warned the board that the work was costing up to 15 percent more because smaller firms often charged higher fees. Delays were mounting. And the district was losing money on architects it fired.

The district paid $56,000 to an architect fired from a project at Key Biscayne Elementary and $70,000 to one at Snapper Creek Elementary.

PROBLEMS PERSIST

The delays and rising costs kept coming -- even after buildings started going up.

Major addition and renovation projects cost an average of 9 percent, or $123,000, more than planned. Those extra costs amounted to more than $17 million, enough to build a new middle school.

District officials point out that the extra money in some cases covered unexpected conditions, such as soil contamination, or pressing repairs that had been put off for years.

But a district audit found that a single person could request a massive change based solely on preference or taste -- not necessity. Requests came from board members, principals, community leaders, administrators.

The average project saw a cumulative construction delay of 100 days. Delays at almost 40 projects lasted for more than a year, and 18 were delayed more than 500 days.

"The staff would always say there was bad weather. There was rain," said board member Perla Tabares Hantman. Rain delays, however, contributed to just 4 percent of lost construction time.

At the packed Glades Middle School, students waited 13 years for a promised science wing. Meanwhile, a principal successfully demanded that the front office be covered with expensive tile.

"I can't imagine how you teach biology without a lab," parent Susan Katralla said. ``I guess you just sort of conceive of what it would be like to look inside a worm."

Problems with architects and engineers also dogged projects long after construction began.

The $4.2 million project at American Senior High is now seven months behind schedule, largely because of lingering design problems.

Since 1988, the district has paid $30 million in increased construction costs because of mistakes made by architects and engineers. Despite the problems, the board in the early 1990s weakened a policy to charge architects for their errors.

"We should have gone after them," admits Board Chairman Michael Krop, who has served on the board for 22 years.

At Miami Beach High, a science wing that opened in 1999 leaks every time it rains. District and school staff members say the architect designed the roof with slopes, slants and joints, which quickly became entryways for water. Other issues also contributed.

Brown water has stained the wall behind science teacher Gloria Inclan's periodic table of elements. The drywall until recently was crumbling.

"We had all this corrosion here and nobody did anything," said Assistant Principal George Pollack.

SUBSTANDARD WORK

Inexperienced contractors also bungled projects, but the district for years failed to seek penalties.

At Lawton Chiles Middle, water seeped in through stucco cracks and failed caulking. At Whispering Pines Elementary, improperly sealed spaces above the ceiling allowed moisture and mold into the building, causing air quality problems. At Hialeah Middle School, stucco on a new addition fell off in sheets.

Former Superintendent Visiedo said he wanted to see dozens of contractors fired, sued or charged for mistakes, but said the district's legal staff regularly refused.

"If there was one thing that absolutely drove me to a rage, it was the unwillingness of our legal staff to try to go after these guys," he said.

Johnny Brown, the board's chief attorney since 1999, said the legal staff could pursue only cases where there was solid evidence.

The school system has charged contractors a total of $2.9 million for delays or incomplete work on completed projects since 1988. That's $207,000 a year.

The district also failed to evaluate contractors before they were hired. And even after contractors botched jobs or left them incomplete, the board gave them more work, sometimes repeatedly.

In 1990, the board hired Roma Construction to build Marjory Stoneman Douglas Elementary. The project was 390 days late, and Roma forfeited $45,000 for pulling out before the work was complete.

Just four years later, the board rehired the company to build Paul Bell Middle -- a $14.6 million contract. There the company improperly installed the electrical system, put in the wrong walls and cafeteria floor, turned in two flawed and incomplete classrooms, and failed to finish the concrete work, according to the district, which successfully claimed damages. Officials of Roma could not be reached for comment.

District staff members cite a state law that required school systems to hire the lowest responsible bidder for construction jobs.

But as early as 1994, state law allowed "prequalification" of contractors, though it wasn't required. And districts had the right to reject contractors who had bungled other projects. In 1998, the state started requiring prequalification.

It wasn't until 1999 -- 11 years into the construction program -- that Miami-Dade County Public Schools

started prequalifying.

"Nobody wanted to do it here," said Carlos Hevia, executive director of construction. ``It was like uncharted waters. All of a sudden you were telling somebody they couldn't practice their livelihood."

EXPENSIVE SCHOOLS

Now, 15 years after the construction program began, Miami-Dade County has built some of the most expensive schools in Florida, with average costs exceeding those of Broward, Palm Beach and Hillsborough counties.

Legal and administrative costs for new schools in Miami-Dade are more than four times the state average. Architect fees are higher than in Broward, Palm Beach and Orange counties, and many other Florida school districts.

Runaway costs at a handful of projects helped drain the district's budget. Northwestern High School in Liberty City, for one, cost more than $84 million, far more than the district has reported.

Almost half the money spent building Paul Bell Middle and Miami Edison Middle, about $34 million, went to architects, engineers, lawyers, consultants and others -- not to builders.

Meanwhile, at Citrus Grove Elementary, built in the 1950s, the principal has had to use masking tape to patch holes in old windows he had hoped would be replaced. Ten teachers don't have classrooms of their own.

"We work within the system as best we can," Principal Robert Russell said. ``What else can you do?"

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Aging schools wait endlessly for renovation

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER
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Jonathan Virgile showed up at Westview Middle School three years ago with a backpack full of art supplies, a perfectly honed plan to tackle advanced science, and $149 in a college savings account he opened when he was 8.

But what he saw at Westview stopped him cold.

In a math class that smelled of dust and mildew, he watched ants burrow in the window caulking. Through dark hallways with missing roof panels, past stairwells stained by roof leaks, he found a library with only a handful of computers. When he finally made it to science, he discovered that the lab lacked basics like running water, gas and electricity for experiments.

For two years, Jonathan read about Bunsen burners in textbooks. He never got to use one.

"I was kind of excited about going to a new school," said Jonathan, a budding science fiction artist. "That was just smashed to pieces."

It's been 15 years since the Miami-Dade County School Board promised to deliver massive renovations to the district's aging schools with the passage of a $980 million bond referendum. But Westview Middle School is still waiting.

So are at least eight other schools, all promised millions of dollars in renovations that are not yet complete.

"The students, it's just like the same thing they always see. It's like no one cares about them," said Jonathan's mother, Yvelande Virgile.

Virgile thought the bond money would benefit all three of her children. Her older son and daughter attended Westview in the mid-1990s, long after the referendum passed. Jonathan started in 2000. But the new wing didn't open until this school year.

Jonathan is now an eighth-grader, his siblings are in college -- and construction crews are still finishing the renovations.

"I've been here two years and the work was going on," said Westview's principal, Nicholas Emmanuel.

"I've been here four years and it started before I got here," said security monitor Ashuane Haris.

"They've been saying for 11 years that that wing would be ready," said science teacher Sabrina Jones.

Problems struck the project right from the start. The School Board hired architect Edward Ghezzi in 1993, but by 1995, the school district had not yet signed off on his designs.

The district fired Ghezzi in 1996. Ghezzi sued the School Board for wrongful termination; the district settled for $85,000.

"They increase requirements, they add this, they add that. I had 87 working drawings for that project," said Ghezzi, in business since 1956.

In 1997, the School Board hired a new architect. Construction finally began in 1999 when the board hired JV Construction for $6.7 million.

But setbacks continued. In 2000, the district's project manager, Jacob Curry, told his bosses he no longer wanted to work on Westview. Among other things, he said a string of principals made unjustified demands.

"Pursuant to a chain of unwarranted, unprovoked and asinine events, this memo confirms my request to cease all involvement with this project," Curry wrote.

Curry no longer works for the school system.

In 2001, the School Board fired a second company -- the contractor. The company was not paying subcontractors or meeting deadlines, district officials say. JV Construction officials could not be reached for comment.

Early estimates put the Westview project at about $3.5 million. Now it will cost almost three times that much, though the scope of the project has changed. The work, meanwhile, won't be completed until at least October, years later than expected.

Every day at Westview, Jonathan walks past the clatter of construction crews to get to science in the new wing.

Until this year, Jones, the science teacher, had to haul water into class in 10-gallon buckets so students could conduct an occasional experiment.

Now Jonathan is finally in a modern lab. But he lost two years, learning science from textbooks.

Jonathan knows that making it into a top college won't be easy, and though he has started to save for tuition, he is hoping to earn a scholarship.

"My mom wants me to save my money for college, but if I do real good in school, I figure I can get a scholarship. Then I can waste it all on a brand-new convertible."

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Records of costs, budgets are hard to come by

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER AND JASON GROTTO
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Miami-Dade Public Schools tracks the cost of field trips and pizza storage, but the school district has failed to keep tabs on the final costs of construction projects worth billions.

The district, particularly in recent years, has never kept an organized accounting of such basics as architect fees, original project budgets, and overall costs for hundreds of major construction projects.

"If project costs exceeded the budget, staff would amend the budget upwards," said the district's longtime chief financial officer, Richard Hinds.

The School Board paid millions to architects for planning and design of schools, but payment information is buried in a haphazard collection of files. It took the better part of several days for district staffers to find basic architectural costs for about 10 construction projects.

Records were hard to find. Dates were wrong. Files were incomplete.

The Herald last September requested final costs for about 60 schools. The district's new capital budget director, Shari Lee, said it would cost an estimated $33,000 in staff overtime to track the information because it's scattered and databases are incomplete.

"You don't know what you're spending your money on when you can't get a fix on costs," said Ralph Lewis, a Florida International University faculty member and administrator who was hired by Superintendent Merrett Stierheim to help restructure the system.

"We have got to reestablish credibility."

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Stierheim vows fundamental change

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER
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Fed up with construction delays, spiraling costs and poor workmanship, Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Merrett Stierheim is pushing to rebuild the district's construction program.

It could be the toughest job he's ever taken on, he says.

Already, Stierheim has called on his staff to hold architects and contractors more accountable for their work. He has built a planning unit and has called for an advisory committee of engineers, architects and developers.

This week, Stierheim will lead a construction retreat with industry experts and officials from other school systems. "We've got to improve the operation, without question," he said.

But Stierheim has met resistance at almost every step: from a state-appointed advisory board with controversial demands, from some School Board members who complain that change hasn't come fast enough, from district staffers reluctant to share information, and even from his own appointees, such as businessman Joe Arriola, brought in as volunteer chief business officer.

Stierheim and Arriola clashed over how to restructure the district, and Arriola, well connected in the business community, resigned last year.

"I found unqualified people running almost every job [in construction]," said Arriola, a vocal critic of the district and now Miami's city manager. "But you cannot break the bureaucracy over there."

Stierheim says he'll try.

In 15 months on the job, he has cut administrative jobs, seen the district through an $81 million budget shortfall, and reduced the use of cellphones and overtime. Now, he says, he is ready to tackle construction and maintenance.

Miami-Dade County isn't alone in its struggle. A grand jury in 1997 found that Broward County's school construction program was riddled with "questionable actions" and "lapses in ethical practices." The Broward district has made changes, but a recent state attorney's investigation found ongoing problems with mold and mildew.

Stierheim hopes Miami-Dade County will give him the chance to fix the construction program.

"I'm trying to change the culture of an organization that has taken decades to build," he said.

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HOW THIS SERIES WAS DONE

To prepare this series, The Herald studied thousands of pages of construction records, correspondence, school district reports and accounting statements dating back 15 years.

The newspaper analyzed state and national construction costs, school enrollment reports for Florida's 67 school districts, growth rates and census data.

More than 200 people were interviewed, and reporters and photographers made more than 25 visits to schools.

The newspaper also obtained school district databases detailing construction costs and schedules, contractor and architect information, contractor defaults, construction changes and life-safety violations.

The construction analysis of new schools, additions, renovations and repairs was based on more than 1,200 projects, totaling $1.6 billion, completed since 1988.

To capture total costs for 52 new schools where numbers were available, The Herald gleaned information from the district's accounting ledger and project tracking system. Original budgets were available for only 44 of those projects. Land costs were factored out of the analysis. It is possible that not all costs were captured; the district does not currently track final costs by project.

The newspaper also studied 477 major projects to establish delays between the hiring of architects and the hiring of general contractors.

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Missteps fuel crowding crisis

Miscalculations, delays result in too little space, after billions are spent

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER, JASON GROTTO AND TIM HENDERSON
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Math teacher Edwyn Claude plunges through the halls of one of Miami-Dade County's most crowded middle schools with his classroom stuffed into a 30-pound suitcase.

Again and again, he sets up in borrowed rooms.

"If I had a classroom, I'd decorate it the way I'd like, green, because it kind of keeps the kids awake and it's psychologically proven," said Claude, a first-year teacher at John F. Kennedy Middle. ``And anyone could walk in and know that they're in a math class."

But there is no classroom for Claude.

Fifteen years after Miami-Dade Public Schools launched what was then the nation's biggest school construction campaign, a crowding crisis worse than ever chokes the district.

The district built 54 regular elementary, middle and high schools since 1988, but most opened with dozens and sometimes hundreds more students than seats, sending administrators on a scramble for space, teachers and supplies.

And at older schools such as Kennedy Middle, at 1075 NE 167th St., the gap between students and seats has grown dramatically worse.

Yet, it happened when the School Board had billions of dollars to spend.

In 1988, the board promised to "meet essentially all of its new construction" needs over five years with the passage of a bond referendum worth $980 million.

-The district has actually received almost $6 billion since then through a combination of bond money, tax dollars and other sources.

But the district's campuses are still among the most packed in the nation.

SCHOOL SEARCH

To get information about overcrowding and safety issues in a particular school, enter the entire name or part of the name of your school and click on SUBMIT.

Submit

Twenty-two percent of public schools in the United States wrestle with crowding. In Miami-Dade County, the nation's fourth-largest district, it's 66 percent.

No school district can control how fast communities grow, but a Herald investigation found that questionable policies and costly miscalculations helped fuel the crisis. Consider:

• Since 1988, the school district spent just one-fifth of the $6 billion on new school construction. Thirteen percent was funnelled into major school additions and renovations, but some of those projects added extras

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such as administrative offices, not classrooms. Critics say the district should have sunk more money into space for students.

• In a county that grew by more than 92,000 students and is chronically short on land, the School Board opted to build schools smaller than needed. The board wagered that population shifts years from now would ease crowding, leaving behind a fleet of smaller, more suitable schools. But that decision relegated a generation of students to packed campuses.

Of more than 30 new elementary schools built for 885 students each, all but about 10 opened overcrowded.

• The district largely failed to track enrollment patterns that would gauge where new schools were needed most, and how many students would show up when they opened. The board in the mid-1990s dismantled the planning office that analyzed growth.

Though the district built a majority of new schools in high-growth areas, at least nine opened in areas that grew far less quickly or had no growth at all. New schools, meanwhile, were often overwhelmed by unexpected surges in students.

• The district's building cycle is painfully slow. Crucial projects languished an average of 888 days before contractors were ever hired to start construction, often because of architect disputes or repeated planning changes. And even after contractors were hired, delays postponed some projects by months or even years.

• Money that could have been used to build more schools was gobbled up by projects that came in way over budget. New schools alone came in at least $117 million over estimates -- enough to build another 10 elementary schools.

Longtime school facilities chief Paul Phillips argues that the problem is one of runaway growth and a lack of money, not a lack of management.

Less than 25 percent of school construction money comes from the state, forcing rapidly-growing systems such as Miami-Dade's to come up with tens of millions of dollars.

"We knew as soon as we built a school it would be overcrowded," said Phillips, who retired two years ago. ``There was no light at the end of the tunnel. There was not enough land and not enough money."

But Schools Superintendent Merrett Stierheim says the district didn't produce schools fast enough and lacked strong planning. Last June, his staff took a recommendation to the School Board to build bigger schools. And now he's working to overhaul the district's construction program, hoping a series of changes will help the district build more quickly.

"Construction was a mess," said Stierheim, who took the job 15 months ago. ``It was a big, big mess."

BOND INADEQUATE

Miami-Dade County Schools is one of the fastest-growing districts in the nation.

Between 1990 and 2000, student enrollment ballooned by 92,000 students. That equals the number of public-school students in Wyoming.

Other Florida school systems, including Broward, Palm Beach and Orange counties, also saw some of the

nation's highest growth rates. Florida's schools estimate needing at least $11 billion over the next five years for new classrooms.

"We've been able to keep pace with growth but never catch up," said Richard Hinds, Miami-Dade Public Schools' chief financial officer.

Today, district officials admit that the $980 million bond referendum wasn't nearly enough.

But in 1988, bond backers feared the referendum wouldn't pass, so they kept the price down while promising to meet most needs.

"There was an artificial effort to hold it under the $1 billion mark," said School Board member Frank Bolaños. ``I think a lot of people were foreseeing a larger need but were afraid to present a larger bond referendum to the public."

Now, schools are packed, teachers are overwhelmed and parents are furious.

In 1991, the district was short 75,734 permanent seats. By 1996, the gap had grown to 83,520.

In 2002, after years of building, the district was officially short an estimated 55,000 seats, but the actual number is likely much higher. The state several years ago changed the way it counts space in schools, making it appear that Miami-Dade County has thousands more seats than it actually does.

Now, at lunchtime at Miami Senior High, some students squat over cardboard boxes because tables in the cafeteria are packed.

At Palm Springs North Elementary, media specialist Roland Adames last year kept the center open two nights a week so students could borrow books. Just 130 students could fit into the media center, even though the school has more than 1,400.

Kennedy Middle got a 310-seat addition in 1999, but the school still has 2,150 students on a campus built for about 1,000. Kennedy is the second-most crowded middle school in Florida.

"It can get hectic," said Claude. ``But I've got to find a way to deal with it."

FUNDS DISTRIBUTION

Despite the growing space crunch, the School Board opted to spend just $1.2 billion on new-school construction, about one-fifth of the money available to build, repair and maintain campuses.

Millions more was spent on additions and renovations, but dozens of projects added new administrative offices, counseling suites, updated libraries, labs and fine arts rooms, teachers' lounges and parking lots.

"That's not something that my administration can wash its hands of," said Octavio Visiedo, superintendent from 1990 to 1996.

Visiedo said the board made specific promises during the bond campaign for additions such as art and music suites. More classrooms were needed, he said, but if plans changed, parents complained.

District staff also say the state has a say in where and when school systems can add new classrooms. And they say millions of dollars had to be spent upgrading existing schools and adding essentials such as new

roofs and modern technology.

Parents say the district should have spent more money on new classrooms.

Citrus Grove Elementary has a new administrative suite, a computer lab and some resource rooms, all part of the bond program.

But the school, built in the 1950s, has 13 portable classrooms.

Several are so old, the wood frames have rotted. The media center can barely accommodate two classes. The stage is used for storage.

"What we really needed were classrooms," School Board member Marta Pérez said.

OPENING TO CROWDS

New schools didn't fare much better -- a majority were sideswiped by crowding as early as opening day.

In western Miami-Dade, Braddock High opened in 1990 with about 3,800 students, 800 more than the school's building capacity. North of Miami Lakes, Joella Good Elementary opened in 1990 at 350 students over capacity. Near west Kendall, Howard Doolin Middle opened with about 400 students too many.

Education experts are increasingly pushing for smaller schools, but some parents say the School Board should have built campuses that matched the needs of a growing community.

In the bustling neighborhoods of northwest Miami-Dade, Christopher McCarthy spent six years squeezed into Palm Springs North Elementary. He studied state capitols in a cramped portable classroom, took gym in a backyard without a ball field and shared a computer in a lab often too small for his class.

Middle school was supposed to be different. Lawton Chiles Middle School opened three years ago on a sprawling campus without a single portable.

But more than 1,400 students showed up for class that year, about 100 more than the school's building capacity. By the second year, enrollment surged to almost 1,900 -- 600 over capacity. Students crammed into storage rooms and offices, and 12-year-old Christopher in the first days of school sprinted to his packed civics class in case he couldn't find a desk.

"This school opened overcrowded. There should have been portables sitting there before the school opened up," said Christopher's mother, Diana. ``Somebody dropped the ball."

Last June, the board voted to build bigger schools: elementary schools for 1,500 students, middle schools for 2,100 and high schools for 3,600.

Pérez said she doesn't like the idea but she voted for it because she wants to quickly ease crowding.

"We're put in a very difficult position, because this isn't ideal," she says. ``But [the district staff] comes to us and and tells us this is all because of the mistakes of the past and that this is the best we can do for students. . . . It's always like an urgency and an emergency."

The Legislature this year started requiring smaller schools, but Miami-Dade has permission to build larger campuses, and later break them up into smaller schools.

"Even though the concept of smaller schools is great, Okaloosa County can do that, not Dade, Broward, Orange and other high-growth counties," said Victor Alonso, with the district's planning office.

NOT WATCHING TRENDS

The School Board also failed to sink time and money into researching enrollment patterns.

In the mid-1990s, about seven years into the construction program, the district dismantled its advanced planning office. Phillips, former facilities chief, said he did it to save money. District staff say that was a mistake.

When Suzanne Marshall took over as facilities chief two years ago, she quickly made changes.

'I went in and said, ` Who's looking at demographics?' Nobody. 'Who's integrating with county and local government [planners]?' Nobody," she said. ` ` That's advanced planning and that's what we're trying to put in place now."

Planning might have guided staffers as they decided where to build new schools. Since 1988, the district built nine in areas that grew at a slower pace than the rest of the county.

Planning also could have helped schools such as Lawton Chiles Middle, which had to wait several months before portable classrooms arrived to ease crowding.

And planning could have more quickly helped Felix Varela High, which opened in 2000 and already is almost 2,000 students over its building capacity. Now, long after construction crews have gone, the district is spending $3.3 million to build a 22-classroom addition at the new school.

"I'm not sure the district predicted that the area would grow as fast as it did," said Peter de la Horra, executive director of school construction.

Stierheim set up a planning office last year.

SPEED AND EFFICIENCY

No other change is more crucial, parents and school officials say, than building faster. And for less money.

Some construction projects idled for years before contractors were hired. And once the work started, delays at job sites cost the county's schoolchildren more than 80,000 days in lost construction time.

"Our projects have taken too long," said School Board Chairman Michael Krop. ` ` It's unconscionable."

The district busted its budget on 39 of 44 new schools analyzed by the Herald, or roughly nine out of 10 since 1988. In addition to new schools, the district has built 14 smaller buildings, called primary learning centers, seven alternative schools and a number of school additions.

But the new construction has overwhelmingly failed to relieve crowding on Miami-Dade's campuses. Help for schools such as Kennedy Middle and Lawton Chiles Middle, meanwhile, could be months or years away.

Money is tight.

State funding for construction is shrinking. Miami-Dade County Schools received $62 million in 1992-93;

last year, just $27 million.

The school district may soon be unable to take out loans for construction, unless tax revenues increase. Even when the district has taken out loans, the lack of front-end planning has at times caused problems.

The district in 2001 borrowed $25 million to renovate and build an addition at Miami Springs Senior, but work is on hold as the district and community decide how to do it. Not a room has been built, but the district has paid $641,000 in interest on the loan.

Some district staffers are cautiously discussing the possibility of another bond referendum. But board member Bolaños fears it won't float.

"Some folks wish that the mistakes of the past either had not happened or that they could just sweep those mistakes under the rug," he said. ``But the fact is that the School Board has too many black eyes, and I don't think we've done enough to convince the general public that the house has been cleaned."

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Glades Middle waited long to get very little new space

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER
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On a campus with 10 portable classrooms wedged between a concrete building and a basketball court, the only thing parent Susan Kairalla wanted from the bond money promised to Glades Middle School was more space for students.

Instead, the school district tore down four classrooms to make room for a new counselors' suite and expanded the principal's office. Early discussions about a 12-classroom addition were scrapped. Glades Middle got six, but with the loss of four classrooms, the school gained little space.

Kairalla spent weeks in the early 1990s lobbying for more classrooms and is among dozens of Miami-Dade County parents who, at the sputtering end of a massive building program, are now questioning the way the School Board spent millions in crucial construction dollars.

STILL HURTING

It took the board 13 years to deliver the classrooms and renovations to Glades Middle. Now, the school is about 800 students over its permanent-building capacity, and three more portables have been crammed onto a field that sometimes floods when it rains. Students take French class in the cafeteria.

An exceptional-children's class has set up shop in an assistant principal's office.

In 2001, only four middle schools in Florida were more crowded than Glades.

Meanwhile, at a former principal's request, the floor of the front office was covered with expensive tile.

"Unless there is water dripping from the roof, unless there is sewage coming from the ground, what we need is instructional space," Kairalla said. ``The principal does not need to have a palatial estate."

Glades Middle, at 9451 SW 64th St., is a close-knit campus nurtured for years by involved parents and veteran teachers. Chandra Davis' drama students have placed in the state competition for each of the past three years. Test scores were high enough to earn the school an A rating in the state's testing program.

But space is scarce, and the school is waiting for the most basic improvements, such as better lighting.

"If you're going to read, you've got to have lights," said Ricardo Rodriguez, who became principal at Glades last summer.

WORK CAME LATE

Glades Middle School was among the last to see construction from the 1988 bond program. An architect was hired in 1993, but construction didn't start for six more years because of planning delays and other

problems.

The district also needed time to gather the money for construction.

The school saw four different principals during that time, and each tinkered with the project.

"I thought they would come in to do the classrooms, and that wasn't happening," said Davis, who teaches drama in an old science room crowded with props and costumes. ``I thought they would make more space."

The school district worked on the counseling suite and front office because those needs were identified by educators, said Carlos Hevia, executive director of construction. The counseling suite also houses several resource rooms for students.

But Hevia agrees the school needs more classrooms.

"They probably needed more than they got," he said. ``There's no doubt in my mind. We were always asking for more money, more money, more money for that school."

Kairalla says the district's priorities were skewed right from the start.

"After all that money and all that time," she says, ``we only got two more classrooms than we had before."

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At Beach High, when it rains it pours

New building delivers same old problems

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER
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The roof leaks, the air conditioning chronically malfunctions and corroded plumbing in bathrooms sends the stench of urine into the hallways.

So when it came time four years ago to open a new building at Miami Beach Senior High -- 12,000 square feet of slick floors, apple-red lockers and high-tech classrooms -- teachers and students eagerly settled in.

Then it rained.

Within weeks, water coursed into the building through the roof, windows and doors, rotting electrical wire and drywall. The bathroom ceilings collapsed. Leaks in Gloria Inclan's chemistry class destroyed a dozen computers.

The 890 lockers have never been used. They cost an estimated $30,000, but students at Miami Beach are not allowed to use them for security reasons.

Last spring, custodians planting bushes struck electrical wire buried just two inches beneath the dirt and blew the power.

"This is a new building," fumed Assistant Principal George Pollack earlier this school year. ``This shouldn't have happened."

Miami Beach High's struggle to educate students on a haggard and outdated campus is an alarming example of how Miami-Dade Public Schools' 15-year-old, $6 billion building program failed communities waiting for newer, safer, less crowded schools.

School board inertia and frustrating building delays have stifled progress at Miami Beach High. And new construction, which should have brought relief, instead delivered more problems.

Districtwide, at least 19 new buildings suffer from ongoing deficiencies including cracking stucco and extensive water leaks, which can create mold and mildew. The district's staff are checking dozens more buildings now. Instead of calling back architects or contractors, the school district in dozens of cases relied on its own overwhelmed maintenance force to fix the problems, which steals time from the upkeep of schools.

Today, Miami Beach High is crumbling.

It is a campus where water stains streak dingy stairwells, the clocks tell the wrong time, electrical wire dangles from the ceiling, rainwater floods un-level outdoor hallways, light fixtures have rusted and holes mar classroom walls.

SCHOOL SEARCH

To get information about overcrowding and safety issues in a particular school, enter the entire name or part of the name of your school and click on SUBMIT.

Pollack has a tool set stashed in his desk. He scrambles across campus with a walkie-talkie at his ear, a math teacher turned go-to man, juggling building breakdowns.

Submit

"It's like no one pays attention to us," said Alan Cook, a linebacker on the football team. ``You kind of feel like if they don't care, why should we?"

Miami Beach High is now scheduled for massive construction, costing an estimated $51.5 million. But planning for the project has taken more than 30 months and construction won't start for at least a year and a half.

Students who were 14-year-old freshmen when the planning began will be in college by the time the first nail is hit.

"My kids have loved it here and they've had excellent teachers," said Kathy Bass, co-president of the PTA. ``But when I see the filth here, it's just an embarrassment.

``This school has been held together with duct tape."

FIREFIGHTERS CALLED

Case in point: On a humid morning last fall, three firefighters stormed the school's cafeteria.

A kitchen worker tried to plug a food warmer into an electrical outlet when sparks shot five feet into the air. She leapt back and shouted for help.

Minutes later, Lt. Jack Richardson with Miami Beach Fire Rescue pried the burned outlet cover off the wall. The outlet sparked a second time, and he jumped from the flames.

"I should be in classrooms doing observations. I should be creating a learning environment to meet the needs of the kids," said Principal Jeanne Friedman, who has been pushing for repairs.

For years, school district life-safety inspectors have cited hazards at the school, ranging from blocked exits and missing fire extinguishers to combustible wall coverings and drapes.

A Herald analysis shows 364 life-safety citations at the school have still not been fixed, including almost 200 that involve fire-safety issues.

The campus has also suffered from unusual wear-and-tear.

Blocks from the ocean, salt in the air and in the water underground rotted some plumbing and electrical systems. The campus serves double-duty as both a high school and large adult education center.

Today, hairline cracks impair every roof on campus. When it rains, the custodial staff, recently forced to cut four of 19 workers, arrives before daybreak to mop up classrooms.

Founded 76 years ago, Miami Beach High has a proud reputation of producing graduates who have become judges, artists, athletes and politicians. Alumni include actor Andy Garcia and former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin.

In recent years, the school has nurtured an award-winning Rock Ensemble and successful business

program.

"I have some amazing teachers. The education here is equal to anybody else's," senior Andrea Terris said.

But parents and community leaders question how a school district with billions of dollars to spend on construction, renovation and maintenance could allow the campus to spiral into a dangerous state of disrepair.

"The district has systematically ignored the conditions of its facilities. . . . There are 20 years of [repair requests] here that are unanswered," said Paul Novack, a member of a state oversight board studying school construction and a 1976 graduate.

" These buildings would not pass inspection if they were warehouses with no human beings in them."

School district officials say the problem is not neglect -- it's money. Dozens of Miami-Dade County public schools have similar problems.

"Every single school that you walk into needs major repairs and renovations. The needs are so great across the entire district," said Peter de la Horra, executive director of construction.

Miami Beach High parents, however, say the repair delays were not just irresponsible, but dangerous.

In 2000, Novack and three other parents filed suit against the school board, charging the district ignored fire-safety violations at Miami Beach High and at 200 schools across the county.

Through 2003, the School Board has earmarked more than $70 million to fix the violations, including dozens at Miami Beach Senior. But problems persist.

For years, old fire alarms at Miami Beach High were missing levers to pull in an emergency. Instead of installing new ones, the school district covered the boxes and painted them to match the walls.

"It was a cheap way of hiding the problems," said Luis Garcia Jr., a Miami Beach city commissioner and former fire department chief.

A $980 million bond referendum for school construction in 1988 was supposed to bring upgrades to Miami Beach Senior.

The school was slated not only for renovations but the construction of a new wing for science and fine arts. There were plans to replace the clocks. Repair the gym bleachers. Improve the lighting. Fix the fire alarm system.

Right from the start, however, the project was riddled with problems.

An architect was hired to design the project in May 1991, but construction didn't start until 1997, six years later. School district officials say they don't know what caused the delay.

'I was always disturbed by it because I was told, ' It's going to start soon.' I wanted to get it done already," said School Board Chairman Michael Krop, whose district includes Miami Beach High.

ADDED DELAYS

In the last 15 years, the district's construction projects sat an average of 888 days -- or more than two years -- before contractors were hired to start construction.

When construction finally began at Miami Beach High, delays held up the project another 211 days.

When the project was completed in the summer of 1999 -- almost a decade after planning began -- the gym bleachers and many clocks were not fixed. The fire alarm system received only minor repairs.

"As a parent, you sit there with your fingers crossed and wonder, am I going to be here listening to my grandchildren talk about how they need a new school?" PTA member Ondrea Weinkle said.

The new addition, built with modern science labs and equipment, immediately broke down.

A district inspection in June 1999 found ceiling leaks in the new classrooms and water streaming through back doors. The windows leaked, too.

When an inspector returned a year later, after students had moved into the building, the leaks had not been fixed.

John Pennington, who oversees construction litigation for the school system, said the leaks were largely the result of bad roofing materials. The manufacturer has since fixed the problem.

But it took the district at least two years to get the corrections done, and the roof is still leaking. Besides the bad materials, the roof was designed with slants, slopes and dozens of joints, which quickly became entryways for water.

Pollack, the assistant principal, said the district's maintenance staff has tried to fix the roof at least seven times, and questions why the contractor or architect didn't do it.

Said Pennington: ``I don't know the answer to that. I don't know that anybody does."

The project architect, Glenn Buff & Partners, did not return repeated calls. The general contractor, F&L Construction, said the roof was installed properly but the materials and design were faulty.

"I'm not particularly fond of the design myself," said Delio Trasobares, who oversaw the project for F&L. He no longer works for the company. ``We can only do what we were told by plans."

Trasobares said he hasn't heard anything about the shallow burial of electrical wiring, or other problems, such as electrical panels that frequently overheat because they were installed in a room without proper ventilation.

"That was installed as designed," Trasobares said.

LONG-AWAITED NEWS

Last fall, Miami Beach High got the news that parents and teachers had been hoping for: Much of the campus will be replaced.

It took the district months, however, to make the decision.

In spring 2000, school board Chairman Krop and the district's former chief facilities officer presented a

$26.5 million plan to renovate the school in two phases.

It took a year for the school district to commission an architect. Then, after being paid about $60,000, the architect said it would be cheaper to replace the buildings.

Before the project could move forward, the school board had to get permission from the Department of Education to demolish existing buildings. The approval came last February, but it took about eight more months for the district to commission the architect.

The district wanted to let the community have a say in the project, and that caused some delay, said de la Horra. And when the project was upgraded from a renovation to a replacement, the district needed to gather $25 million.

The project -- now three years in the planning -- includes a new addition, a new cafeteria, media center, gym, vocational labs, auditorium and bus drop off, as well as life-safety upgrades.

The delays have frustrated Principal Friedman, who has so far seen 15 preliminary proposals. Pollack wants to see the work done so he can focus on kids again.

Last fall, as he walked through a building, a teacher called out: ``That roof is leaking like crazy.''

"I didn't know that," Pollack said, making a note to call maintenance.

Pollack passed a geometry class when a second teacher called for help:

"They have no place to sit," pointing to three students without desks. ``And two are absent."

In the hallway, a third teacher stopped Pollack: ``By the way, the locks, we can't get them open."

``Where?"

``The staff restrooms. You can unlock them but then you can't get the doors open."

Pollack promised to call the locksmith. He gathered six desks out of an empty classroom for the geometry class and went looking for more.

He passed a math class. "I'm full in here," the teacher said.

A second math class: "My fourth-period has 40 kids," the teacher said.

Pollack started singing, snapping his fingers to The Four Tops tune he sings whenever he's frustrated.

``Now it's the same old song . . . "

Database editor Jason Grotto contributed to this report.

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Edison Middle among the worst in construction flaws

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER
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Construction crews were still working on the new building at the lavishly renovated Miami Edison Middle School when the roof started leaking.

That was six years ago. It hasn't stopped.

Head custodian and former student James Brown remembers how proud he felt watching Miami-Dade Public Schools in the mid-1990s pump millions into the aging campus. Now, Brown has got a maintenance crew on standby every time it rains, ready to mop water from flooded classrooms.

"It leaks, leaks, leaks," said the school's new principal, Onetha Gilliard.

In a school district with dozens of troubled construction projects, Miami Edison Middle stands among the worst.

The renovation cost almost $42 million, millions more than expected and twice the price of a new middle school.

Planning started in the late 1980s, but the job wasn't done until 1997.

An evaluation after the school opened reported uneven tile floors, classroom flooding, peeling paint, unhealthy trees, wall cracks, broken hardware, roof leaks and poor air circulation.

PIGEON PROBLEM

Then there was the pigeon problem.

Months after the new, three-story building opened, birds swooped into the grand outdoor archway and nested on the lights. Every week, Brown had to climb onto a crane and remove the birds. The school eventually installed wire netting.

"The birds would come out and poop on people," Brown said. ` ` The architect designed it to be beautiful but I don't think they anticipated birds to be a major problem."

The school district launched the project in 1988, the year Miami-Dade County voters passed a $980 million bond referendum for school construction.

Plans called for the demolition and replacement of the school, which once housed Miami Edison High.

But lobbying by powerful high school alumni, including school board member Betsy Kaplan, then board vice chair, persuaded the district to take on a far more expensive historical renovation project.

34 CONTRACTORS

Though the 74-year-old facility was structurally weak and fraught with roof leaks, the school board decided to try something new. Instead of hiring one general contractor, the board opted to hire 34 to give minority and female-owned firms a shot at board business. The district also hired a construction manager.

There was, among others, a contractor for the demolition, the fencing, the landscaping, the masonry, the woodwork, the building structure, the site work, the insulation, the doors, the hardwood floors.

Right from the start, the project came in over budget. Bids for construction work were 41 percent higher than expected. The district's staff wanted to reject the bids and start over, but the school board voted to add $10.5 million to the renovation project.

When the work finally began in 1995, delays stifled the project.

When one contractor blew the schedule, many others were affected.

COMPLAINT LETTERS

Finger-pointing and frustration followed:

In a September 1995 letter from BRV Construction Services, hired to do the glass and glazing: ``Please note that BRV is not responsible for what you consider delays in the delivery of the steel windows. . . . As early as March 1995, we advised you of what we considered a potential problem. . . . Had it not taken three months to resolve this issue you could possibly be receiving windows now.''

In a January 1996 letter from the management company hired to oversee the project: ``Urban Organization [hired for the masonry] has made our task particularly difficult, if not impossible, by not staffing the project with a superintendent, as required. . . . This is an important, time critical project and Urban Organization is in danger of causing it irretrievable damage.''

Urban Organization could not be reached for comment.

In a September 1996 letter from The Bared Company, hired to do the air-conditioning work: ``As you know, we have been promised electrical power for several weeks with no results. . . . We will demobilize our crew until permanent electrical power is available. . . .

``We reserve the right for a time extension and related costs. . . . ''

Despite the problems, many students, staff and alumni are proud of the renovations. Architect R.J. Heisenbottle won awards for the design and preservation of the school, where the courtyard is home to the goal post used Thanksgiving Day 1952, when Miami Edison beat its rival, Miami High, 21-7.

"I don't think it's of any use to dig up mistakes of the past when the mistakes have been corrected," Kaplan said.

Problem is, many haven't.

One of the contractors tried to fix the leaks after the building opened, district officials say, but the leaks continue.

"We have water leaks here," Brown said, ``and they can't really be stopped."

Database editor Jason Grotto contributed to this report.

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Thousands of fire hazards found in Dade schools

Even easy-to-correct flaws linger for years on campuses

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER AND JASON GROTTO
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The Miami-Dade School Board has failed to fix more than 44,000 fire- and life-safety hazards threatening the district's schools -- including thousands that would have cost $50 or less to correct -- despite repeated warnings from fire marshals, principals and the school system's own inspectors.

In a district that has received almost $6 billion since 1988 to build, repair and maintain schools, campuses across the county lack fire extinguishers, exit signs, smoke detectors, emergency escape windows, fire-resistant glass, evacuation maps, fire-rated walls, two-way call systems and emergency lights.

Thousands of deficiencies have lingered for years, a Herald investigation has found.

Miami Senior High, with 486 outstanding violations, is missing smoke detectors and emergency escape exits. Corridors need guardrails, classrooms need emergency lights. At least one portable classroom isn't anchored to the ground.

The electrical room recently caught fire, which terrified Principal Victor Lopez because some classrooms don't have working alarms.

"In this case, the fire alarm actually worked. We were thrilled," said Lopez, who said some improvements have been made since then. ``The whole school could have caught fire. It upsets me that we cannot move on these things fast enough."

Scrutiny from fire marshals, parents, the media and a Miami-Dade grand jury prodded the school board to set aside about $65 million through the end of this school year to address serious violations.

SCHOOL SEARCH

To get information about overcrowding and safety issues in a particular school, enter the entire name or part of the name of your school and click on SUBMIT.

Submit

WIDESPREAD PROBLEMS

But a Herald analysis reveals sweeping deficiencies in schools from Miami Lakes to Hialeah to Homestead. It will likely take months and millions more dollars to correct long-standing problems -- as well as widespread changes in the way the district does business.

A strapped and sometimes inefficient maintenance department, planning gaps and outright neglect have allowed safety violations to fester for years. And money that could have

Almost 40 percent of the safety hazards listed in a school district data file have not been corrected, including 150 that date back to the 1970s.

Some are particularly serious, such as emergency escape windows that are locked, blocked or missing or indoor stairwells without the walls and doors needed to block traveling smoke.

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The estimated price to fix all violations, according to district estimates: $136 million.

But in at least dozens of cases, little more than a screwdriver would have solved the problem.

The Herald's review details thousands of minor violations left uncorrected, including almost 8,300 that would have cost the district $50 or less to fix.

"There's a culture at the school site, everybody has their job, everybody has their function, and if you cross the line, you get burned," said Carlos Hevia, executive director of school construction. ``Technically, we're not prepared systemwide to respond to things that quickly."

Still, Hevia and others point out that many outstanding violations are technical and don't put children in danger. Schools can be cited for everything from missing toilet paper holders to broken light bulbs. They also say it's near impossible for a system with more than 350 schools to keep campuses free of all potential hazards.

Vandalism is a chronic problem, officials say, and so is keeping complicated systems like fire alarms in good shape.

WARNINGS IGNORED

But the school board routinely ignored warnings about widespread neglect, and only promised to make repairs after intense public pressure, Miami-Dade County fire marshals say. One in three outstanding deficiencies involve fire safety.

Though the district has corrected some 68,000 violations over the years, it took 2.8 years on average to get the work done. And more than 2,100 deficiencies took 10 years or longer to fix.

"It was a nightmare. Anything and everything that we gave over to them would be acknowledged, but that was as far as it went," Miami-Dade County Fire Marshal Alfredo Suarez said. ``You'd come back, the same violation would be there."

``Now, they're playing catch-up for 30 years of putting this aside."

Part of the problem, fire marshals say, was Florida law. Fire marshals were not required to inspect schools unless they suspected children were in imminent danger. A change in law in 2000 gave fire marshals inspection responsibilities.

But there was another hurdle.

Even after fire marshals discovered problems, they had no authority to force the school system to fix them.

"I could sit there and rant and rave and get all upset but I had no authority," City of Miami Fire Marshal Virgil Fernandez said. ``The fox was guarding the hen house."

Fire marshals convinced legislators this year for the authority to cite school districts for building code violations. Now, they say the district is pushing for faster response times, prioritizing projects and seeking help from life-safety engineers.

They credit Superintendent Merrett Stierheim, who took over 15 months ago.

After learning of uncorrected violations from The Herald last month, Stierheim sent a letter to principals demanding they immediately correct the most basic violations, such as removing storage from electrical rooms and unlocking exit doors.

But parents and community leaders question why the district overlooked the conditions for years.

"They are so strict on fire drills and making sure the kids are doing the right thing. But if the kids aren't being protected, that's a bigger issue," said Tammy Austin, Parent Teacher Association President at Miami Shores Elementary, with 319 uncorrected violations. ``I am probably the biggest fan of Miami Shores Elementary. But if there are fire violations, they have to be corrected . . . immediately."

Since 1970, dozens of fires have hit the district's schools, gutting classrooms, portables, offices, cafeterias and entire buildings, and inflicting hundreds of thousands of dollars in property damage. Most were caused by arson, but electrical shorts, heating units, botched science experiments, storage rooms stuffed with flammable materials and accidents during repair and renovation work triggered some of the blazes.

Meanwhile, almost half of Miami-Dade County schools were built in the 1950s or earlier, and are saddled with safety equipment that's old, broken or obsolete. In 2001, one in four principals reported recent failures in fire and security alarm systems.

The district is also the most crowded urban school system in Florida. Students take class in storage rooms and closets without emergency exits. Teachers have pushed filing cabinets into hallways to make space, blocking exits. Doors have been locked shut to control traffic.

"All these things converge into a very serious situation," said Paul Novack, a parent and local mayor who in 2000 helped draw public attention to the violations, particularly at Miami Beach High.

Today, Miami Beach High has 364 outstanding violations.

School Board Chairman Michael Krop said the board didn't know how serious the problems were until fire marshals got involved.

"I can't make an excuse for why they weren't addressed. I don't think there is an excuse," he said. ``But when we discovered it, we took action."

The district, however, has had seven inspectors who visited schools annually, citing everything from broken gates to missing floor tiles to structural deficiencies.

Every year, detailed reports were delivered to school board offices. Board members had only to open a box and pull a file to learn of the deficiencies.

The district's inspectors also funnelled the information to the maintenance department, school principals and the construction office. But year after year, at school after school, they found the same deficiencies, overlooked and unfixed.

"We've been notifying every department . . . about what needs to be fixed," said John DiBenedetto, who oversees the inspectors.

Shari Lee, the district's capitol budget director, said the system has spent millions correcting violations at the same time it tackled renovation and addition projects at schools countywide. But Hevia said life-safety projects were frequently scaled back.

In 1988, after Dade County voters approved a $980 million referendum for school construction, the district planned to fix many deficiencies. But when money was tight, officials cut life-safety work.

"It always became a shorter list," Hevia said.

The district's maintenance department also contributed repair delays.

A 2001 audit of the district's maintenance department found a 10-inch thick report, containing 37,000 open work orders, some dated as early as 1997, largely ignored by maintenance directors.

Part of the problem is that in the past 10 years, 158 specialist trade persons have been cut even as dozens of new schools opened.

"The failure is in the follow-up," said school board member Frank Cobo, who was elected to the board in 2001 and has been requesting updates on life-safety repairs.

The audit also found maintenance relies heavily on overtime and lacks a system to prioritize projects, assigning work in a "somewhat random order" based on the availability of staff and supplies. And maintenance sometimes spends too much on simple tasks -- replacing a door cost the district $1,110, repairing broken sprinkler heads cost $8,061, painting handrails cost $9,697.

"I am overwhelmed by the bureaucracy of it all, the inability to make the right decisions quickly," said Ed Easton, who chairs a state-appointed oversight board studying school construction and maintenance.

Stierheim is in negotiations with a private company to oversee maintenance.

In recent months, the school system has studied the safety needs at 185 schools, and has spent $14.6 million installing new fire alarms and

sprinklers in schools. Fifteen schools are getting equipment now and 37 might next year.

"We've got to keep going until all the work is done," district Facilities Chief Suzanne Marshall said. `Year by year, we'll just have to keep plugging away and doing the work."

WAITING FOR REPAIRS

Meanwhile, 75-year-old Miami High waits for more repairs.

Lopez, the principal, walks the halls of a school he once attended, noting missing fire extinguishers and corroded classroom walls. There's a hole the size of a basketball on the front of the school; someone covered it with a metal grate.

Roof leaks have warped the school stage. Teachers lay newspaper down when it rains to keep students from slipping.

Lopez, who has worked for the district for 29 years, said his requests for help often go unanswered.

"Sometimes you do all the paperwork and everything that you have to do, and then they say there are no funds to do it," he said. `Miami High has been put on the back burner when it comes to upkeep."

Board members say they're committed to repairing the violations.

"I don't want to be around if one child gets burned," Cobo said.

''Forget about a school or more than one child. One is too many."

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Nevada school district a role model for S. Fla.

Dade school chief hoping to use lessons to speed construction

BY DEBBIE CENZIPER AND JASON GROTTO
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Twenty-five hundred miles from Miami, in the same year the Miami-Dade School Board approved a massive bond referendum for construction, a school district rising from the deserts of southern Nevada faced a staggering challenge.

More than 8,000 new students a year were flooding Clark County Schools, and even more were on the way. In the span of a decade, the Las Vegas-based system with some 120,000 students expected to more than double in size. In 1988, voters passed a bond referendum worth $600 million.

Both school systems, overwhelmed by construction needs and flush with new money, launched two of the most aggressive school-building campaigns in the nation.

In the past 15 years, Clark County built 147 schools.

Dade County built 61, and that includes seven largely funded before the $980 million bond referendum in 1988. The school system also built 14 primary learning centers, small buildings to ease crowding on existing campuses.

It took Clark County five years and $600 million to build the first series of 57 schools, plus renovations and additions, promised in 1988.

It took Miami-Dade County the better part of 15 years and well over $1.2 billion for new schools alone.

Clark County has since approved two more bond referendums worth $1.2 billion. The district built 145 major school additions, bought up vacant land, spent hundreds of millions on renovation projects, replaced three inner-city schools, and opened dozens more schools, including 25 in the last two years alone.

The work was done at a frantic pace.

"We delivered quality schools for a reasonable price," said Dale Scheideman, director of new schools facilities and planning in Clark County. "And we opened schools quickly. Because we were able to do that, the community didn't question us."

Yet, controversy has hounded Miami-Dade County's school-construction program.

It cost too much, produced too little, dragged on for years even as communities waited and children grew up. The hope for upgraded, less crowded schools died as project after project stumbled, leaving behind a district now desperate to muster public confidence.

SCHOOL SEARCH

To get information about overcrowding and safety issues in a particular school, enter the entire name or part of the name of your school and click on SUBMIT.

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Crowding is worse than ever. Leaks and cracking walls afflict new buildings. Thousands of fire- and life-safety violations linger on campuses from Hialeah to Homestead. Existing schools struggle to teach children in schools taxed by obsolete classrooms, busted air conditioners, leaking roofs, corroded plumbing.

Superintendent Merrett Stierheim is beginning to overhaul the construction program.

Late Wednesday, he released a three-page memo to his top staff detailing six sweeping proposals. Among them: hiring more experienced architects and holding them accountable for errors that drive up costs. He also wants construction experts to regularly inspect projects -- from planning to construction to the final occupancy of buildings.

Stierheim is tracking problem construction projects to find out why new buidings had deficiencies such as water intrusion.

And his staff is talking about strategies that districts like Clark County have long relied on, such as building a series of schools using "prototypes," meaning the same plans and designs.

Today, he's hosting a construction retreat with construction experts to explore ways to rebuild the program. "The overwhelming conclusion is we can do a better job, and that we . . . are committed to doing that," he said. ``I hope that people are going to at least have hope that there is a light at the end of the tunnel."

BONDS APPROVED

After the success of the first bond referendum, voters in Clark County approved another one for $600 million in 1994.

It took the district less than four years after that vote to open 25 new schools and renovate existing campuses. In 1996, a third bond referendum for $643 million paid for 19 new schools and renovations.

The district will collect another $3.5 million in tax proceeds over the next 10 years to pay for 88 more schools, among other things.

Some of Clark County's success is due to the consistent flow of new money -- all told, the district has so far received about $3 billion since 1988. Miami-Dade County Schools have received $6 billion, but has many more schools to repair and renovate. Miami-Dade County also uses some of that money to pay for maintenance; Clark County does not.

Yet Clark County has faced unusual challenges.

It's not easy or cheap to build in Nevada because utilities and roads must be linked to sites in the desert. The district was often the first to build and had to coordinate water, sewer lines and electricity.

Despite those obstacles, Clark County, now the nation's sixth-largest system with 260,000 students, has been cited as a national model. Scheideman has helped more than 30 other districts fine-tune construction programs.

One of the keys to Clark County's success is its heavy reliance on identical designs to build schools.

Using the same plans and designs saves time and architect fees, and can also cut down on construction costs because contractors are usually familiar with the plans.

The Miami-Dade County School Board over the years rejected a heavy use of prototypes.

In 1991, former Superintendent Octavio Visiedo urged the board to approve the use of the same designs for up to six new schools. Until then, the board only allowed one design for up to three schools.

Visiedo was voted down.

"I even had an analysis that if we did this for the construction of all schools, I could pay for more new schools that were not even in our plans," Visiedo said.

Janet McAliley, on the board from 1980 to 1996, said she supported a limited use of prototypes but didn't want every school to look the same.

Clark County also for years relied on a pool of just 15 architects that became experts in school design. The group was recently expanded to 30.

In Miami-Dade County, the School Board had promised to spread lucrative design work across the community if the bond referendum passed. In a six-year period in the early 1990s, the district worked with more than 180 architects. Some firms with little experience on school projects bungled jobs, running up costly errors and delays.

Another difference: Clark County at the start set specific standards for schools, detailing building features and equipment. That made it difficult for staff to justify costly and time-consuming changes after construction started.

In Miami-Dade County, delays on construction projects in the last 15 years added more than 80,000 days in cumulative delays. About one-third of those costs were fueled by district and school staffers who altered the scopes of projects after construction began.

Clark County also built a sophisticated planning unit to determine where to build in a district spanning 8,000 square miles and several cities.

The district created teams to work with developers, utility departments, building departments, permitting officers, code enforcers and city and county planners. District planners estimate how quickly a new school will "tip," meaning enrollment shoots past the school's building capacity.

New schools in Clark County were not inexpensive, largely because the district had to build from scratch in the desert and compete for a limited pool of contractors and construction workers busy building the Las Vegas strip. In some cases, the district spent more for new-school construction than Miami-Dade County did.

But the schools regularly opened on time and within budget. Now, well over half of the schools are new.

"Our community is happy with that," Scheideman said. ``Our kids have a nice place to go to school."

OTHER COUNTIES

Like Clark County, both Broward and Palm Beach counties frequently use identical designs to build schools.

Palm Beach County opened 11 schools last year on time and within budget.

At Independence Middle, a new, $17 million school north of West Palm Beach, students study robotics in a state-of-the-art technology lab. They line-dance in a gym complete with a sound system.

Construction took just 15 months because the school was built by the same architect-contractor team that completed an identical school in southern Palm Beach County.

"If they don't have school experience, they can get it somewhere else and then come here," said Tom Johns, director of program management for Palm Beach County Schools.

Miami-Dade County Schools has made a number of changes in recent months to strengthen its construction program.

The district now evaluates general contractors before they're hired and works with a smaller pool of architects. Changes during construction have been scaled back, and the district is no longer giving new business to contractors who left old jobs incomplete.

Longtime district staffers endorse the changes but defend the 15-year-old construction program. They say despite unexpected growth surges and damage caused by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the program delivered what was promised and more.

"Every penny I've spent, I've spent for the good of kids," said Greg Boardman, a veteran district construction supervisor who recently took a job in Broward County Schools. ' 'All this criticism, it's almost insulting to us."

But Miami-Dade County parents and educators, who in some cases waited years for promised projects, say only sweeping change will earn back the trust of a disgruntled community.

At a January meeting of a state-appointed oversight board, which is studying maintenance and construction, member Ed London pitched a plan he said would fix the most pressing problems.

CHANGES PROPOSED

The district, among other things, would team up architects and contractors on all large construction projects, rely heavily on prototypes, set a fixed price for projects, provide a bonus for early completion and stricter penalties for delays.

The changes would mean the district would likely need far fewer positions in its construction department. And there would be less work to spread among architects and general contractors, which could draw criticism.

"I believe the School Board senses that in order for something to happen, you have to have change," London said. ' 'The only thing is how much pressure the board will receive both from employees and from architects who feel threatened.

' 'Can they stand up to it?"

Herald database editor Tim Henderson and staff writer Matthew I. Pinzur contributed to this report.

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Board member urges repairs

Herald Staff Report

Miami-Dade School Board member Frank Bolaños demanded Wednesday an accounting of all uncorrected fire- and life-safety violations in schools.

At least 44,000 outstanding violations threaten the district's schools, ranging from missing fire extinguishers and exit signs to emergency escape windows that are locked, blocked or missing. About 8,300 would cost $50 or less to fix, a Herald investigation reported this week.

At Wednesday's School Board meeting, Bolaños said he may push for more money to quickly fix the problems. "This is not an area to cut any corners," he said.

Miami-Dade County Fire Marshal Alfredo Suarez told board members the district has made significant progress fixing outstanding violations. But he said more work needs to be done.

"Keep the money going in the right place," he said. ``Speed it up if you can."

Almost 40 percent of the safety hazards listed in a school district data file have not been corrected, including 150 that date to the 1970s. The estimated price to fix all violations, according to district estimates: $136 million.

SCHOOL SEARCH

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